

**Respecting perspectives: bringing together a leadership team at Heliogen**, with Christie Obiaya and Teal Reamer

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**Masami Cookson:** Welcome to Fearless Thinkers, the BTS podcast. My name is Masami Cookson, and our host is Rick Cheatham, Head of Marketing at BTS.

On today's show, Rick sits down with Teal Reamer, Vice President and Head of BTS Central, along with her client, Christie Obiaya, CFO at Heliogen.

Christie has served as Heliogen's CFO since 2021. Prior to Heliogen, Christie was CFO and head of strategy for Bechtel Energy. She started her career as an engineer, and has a degree in chemical engineering – and her MBA – from MIT.

Teal Reamer specializes in implementing strategy and large scale change initiatives with her clients. She has over a decade of experience engaging with leaders across industries from energy, to retail, education, and manufacturing.

Hey Rick, how are you doing today?

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**Rick Cheatham:** I'm doing great, Masami. It's funny 'cause I was talking to Gloria, one of our team members in marketing, and also works here on the podcast, just before this, and she was telling me that Heliogen, actually – for her friends that are recent graduates with engineering degrees – is a huge draw. So, it's really cool to get to have them on the show today.

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**Masami:** That's amazing. If the young people are excited about it, it's a good place to work.

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**Rick:** Absolutely. Well, and it's one of those things, and when you hear Christie talk... It's a mission-driven organization and in this particular case, she's speaking to the reality of the new leadership team coming together with a really wide variety of experiences and how that was created intentionally so that they could come up with better solutions faster.

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**Masami:** That's awesome. I can't wait to hear more.

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**Rick:** Well then, let's go.

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Christie, Teal, welcome to the show.

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<b>Christie:</b>	Thank you, Rick, happy to be here.
<b>Teal:</b>	Thank you.
	And we really appreciate you being here, Christie, as you will forever be famous in the world of Fearless Thinkers as our first client to actually appear on the show.
<b>Christie:</b>	My pleasure.
<b>Rick:</b>	Hoping you could give us a little bit of background on yourself and Heliogen.
<b>Christie:</b>	<p>Yeah, absolutely.</p> <p>I have spent my career straddling the areas of, really, energy and finance and big projects. I came to Heliogen in early 2021.</p> <p>Heliogen's a renewable energy technology company on a mission to decarbonize industry. Our team has innovated and we're now deploying a generation of concentrated solar energy systems that harness the suns energy using mirrors, computer vision, artificial intelligence, and thermal energy storage. And we can then use that green energy in the form of heat, power or hydrogen.</p> <p>And so, I joined the company along with many of our other leadership team members around the time that the company started focusing on full scale commercialization. And there were really two things that made it very compelling for me to join: one was the potential that I saw in Heliogen's differentiated technology being a game changer, and the second was the opportunity to work with Bill Gross and the incredible team that he built towards realizing that vision.</p>
<b>Rick:</b>	Sounds like a fresh approach in new capabilities to be able to perform in the industry.
<b>Christie:</b>	The company was originally founded in 2013, and after achieving its 2019 milestone of starting up its first pilot-scale facility – that is when they really started to look at building out their full-scale commercial offering. It's been really exciting to be part of that because there's really a few missions out there that I can think of that have the greater potential impact for humanity.
<b>Rick:</b>	That broader mission constantly in front of you would be very inspiring, probably at all levels of your organization.

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**Christie.**

Absolutely.

You know, many people join the company with that mission in mind. They see Bill, you know, at places like, Davos at The World Economic Forum, or at conferences talking about the technology and the challenge in front of us, and that is really one of the factors that helps us attract talent.

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**Rick:**

Christie, another thing that I kind of found inspiring was what you were telling me about, the intentionality and how the leadership team was formed. I was wondering if you could share a little bit about that.

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**Christie:**

Sure, yes.

Our CEO, Bill Gross, was very deliberate in building his leadership team with people who have deep experience in, you know, very different industries, ranging from energy, to space exploration, to manufacturing, to tech.

His belief in philosophy was around the value in bringing together diverse perspectives in being able to help achieve breakthrough performance.

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**Rick:**

Having that diversity of experience and thought would make a tremendous difference being able to look at very complex problems through multiple lenses.

Teal, if you could add from the BTS point of view and what we've seen when it comes to diversity and how that's enabling leadership teams to work.

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**Teal:**

Sure, Rick, happy to share a little perspective.

You know, I think what Christie has shared is that Bill really intentionally brought together the best minds, the best personalities, the best expertise to lead Heliogen. And, as Christie shared, their strategy is extraordinarily differentiated in the market, and really inspiring.

Broadly, when we work with our clients, we know that it's critical to address culture and strategy together. And oftentimes, our clients will spend an inordinate amount of time on the strategies, on the visions, on the goals, but maybe less time on the behaviors on the culture side of executive teams.

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The culture is just as important as the strategy, because when we really dig into culture, at the heart, what we're talking about is how we do things. And for leadership teams, in particular, it's: How do we work together?

We're helping them pressure-test scenarios; we're helping them elevate areas of alignment, elevate areas of misalignment. So that when things don't go as planned – which we know they won't, because the best-laid plans still encounter challenges – the team knows how they will address those challenges so that they can keep moving forward and successfully executing the strategy of the organization.

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**Christie:**

I think that's spot on. I think anytime you bring a group of people together who are trying to achieve an ambitious goal like what we're working on, it requires peak performance at both an individual level and at a team level.

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**Rick:**

I would think that there would be some shifts that you all had to make, just in your thinking based on your experience.

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**Christie:**

Teal and her team were able to help us accelerate our ability to find common ground and areas of alignment.

You know, there are aspects of Heliogen's situation that I would characterize as very typical. For example, we do come to the table with, you know, different natural communication styles, and different inherent personality traits, like being introverted or extroverted and that sort of thing.

But there are aspects of our situation that I would characterize as very unique, as well: one, being the kind of diversity of backgrounds and experiences that we have across different industries, and then the other, being the fact that we're now at a relatively earlier stage company, and at the same time we're also a public company, which comes with its own set of challenges and opportunities.

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**Rick:**

I would think that is a tremendous shift as you think through how, you know, how do we function, what do we prioritize? And even, how do we manage our external communication as well as our internal communication?

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**Teal:**

You know, to build on what Christie's sharing, it's true that Heliogen is in a different stage than many of our BTS clients. We work very much so with companies that have been around for a hundred years, a hundred plus years. And what I would share from our perspective is that, while Christie and the team at Heliogen have been going through their own transformation in terms of how to work together, it is also true that clients who have been working together for decades also need to think about how they will work together in the face of new opportunity or challenges.

Because, when you work together for a long time, you start to establish a collective set of beliefs, or a collective way of thinking, that can lead you down a certain path – when in reality, if you keep going that way and you don't revisit your areas of alignment and misalignment and address how you are going to seize opportunit[ies] when they arise, you can miss opportunities for growth.

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**Rick:**

What are some of the techniques that you found most useful to more quickly and confidently make decisions?

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**Christie:**

Having triggers that force us to revisit strategic decisions. One of these examples is... The Inflation Reduction Act was passed in early August. That was a trigger event for us to say, okay, well we've got these three offerings – between heat and power and hydrogen – and you know, should that prompt another look at how we're prioritizing our near-term project portfolio.

So, those are the kinds of things that, you know, it's been very helpful in working with Teal and the BTS team on as we look to establish our operating cadence.

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**Teal:**

From a BTS perspective, we're not coming with guidance on strategy. Our expertise is taking the complex and making it simple for our clients to do their best work, because they know their business – they know their industry – better than we ever will.

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**Rick:**

It sounds like in both places there's just profound respect for people and the perspectives that they bring and that nobody needs to be the smartest person in the world, we'll collectively solve

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together much faster.

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**Christie:** Yes, well said. And, just the value of deliberately seeking perspectives that are different from your own, I think it, you know, it may sound cliché, but it taking it seriously and realizing the real value in that.

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**Rick:** Yeah, and it's so hard because I love being told I'm right. So, looking for a counter-perspectives is really difficult sometimes, but I can't think of a time that it was actually the bad choice.

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**Christie:** It comes back to the inclusion piece, too. So, having the diverse perspectives is great but you don't get to manifest the benefits unless you're actually having inclusive dialogue that makes sure that all of those perspectives are heard during a given conversation.

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**Teal:** I would imagine many of our podcast listeners are familiar with the notion of forming, storming, norming, and performing. And what I'm hearing you say is, because the team is so united behind the vision and the mission of Heliogen, the forming was the easy piece. It's the storming, in terms of "How are we actually gonna work together? How do we start to appreciate each other's perspective? How do we start to make decisions together?" That is something that is so critical in the executive team and really any team, but especially executive team performance, that it requires more attention.

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**Christie:** Well said.

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**Rick:** And then the last, I guess, "big rock" that I heard in today's discussion is: The power of kind of scenario planning, and putting in real checkpoints for compelling events, and shifting quickly, versus basically not planning for things to pop up or change. And knowing what some of those drivers or triggers could be. Getting out in front of that, I think, is what I'm hearing is been a big difference in your ability to make better decisions faster.

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**Christie:** Yes. I think we all really value what scenario planning can do in terms of kind of forcing you to

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think about all the corners of the box that are possible.

And, I think it's one of the things that has led to us making, you know, stronger, stronger and more robust decisions.

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**Teal:**

The one thing I would say about scenario planning is, when we talk about scenario planning at BTS, there are a bunches of different tools and resources that we can leverage. Certainly, we have the robust financial model-based tool that lets us look at different scenarios. When we are working with teams, we will often bring in those types of scenario tools, but we're also talking about simple if-then statements. So, if X happens, how will we, as an executive team, respond?

And so, it's not a simple Excel-sheet scenario planning, or scenario anticipation, that we're looking at. We're actually looking at human behavior.

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**Rick:**

What's your best advice for somebody who has a leadership team? They can't necessarily change things at the overall company level, but they want to make a difference today...?

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**Christie:**

One thing I would say is, just to approach situations and your team with an open mind and to seek out, you know, I think it comes back down to seeking out the different perspectives when you're looking at defining a path forward, even within your team and your span of control.

At all levels, we have the power to be inclusive and to make sure different perspectives are heard. And you know, I think people would be surprised that you don't have to have a high or a fancy title in order for [you to ask] for someone's opinion or [echo] a point that you think is good to make a meaningful difference in how the conversation progresses.

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**Rick:**

Cool.

I really can't thank you both for the time you've given today, and again, Christie – as our very honored guest – I especially appreciate you taking the time to join us.

And have a great day.

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**Christie:** Thanks Rick, thank you for having me.

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**Teal:** Thank you.

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